

Politics of Latour

A review of Bruno Latour, **Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy** (Harvard University Press, 2004).

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The title and subtitle of this book sizzles and sings with the promise of a political agenda framed in terms of liberatory values, social justice concerns, and contemporary political relevance. It is a false promise. Latour has divorced himself from real social problems, practical solutions, and the sort of ecological-sociological imagination that grounds research, theory, and practice in organizational, environmental, and ecological studies. His misplaced critique of sociology and of social constructivism in particular juxtaposed with his love for metaphysics and philosophy in general gives his reasoning a quaint antiquarian quality. There are, nonetheless, some reasons to cautiously recommend this book to readers of this journal.

Latour began his academic career as a pioneer in the anthropology of science. He helped draw attention to the social realities of scientific practice and away from the mythical and idealistic views of science handed down to us by sociologists (e.g., Robert Merton), historians (e.g., George Sarton), and philosophers (e.g., Karl Popper) of science. That was about twenty-five years ago. During the intervening years, Latour has retained his ties with the science studies movement (he is the current president of the Society for Social Studies of Science) while transforming himself into a "great French philosopher" widely influential across the intellectual landscape. In this book, he almost seems to be positioning himself as a candidate for the Nobel Peace prize, so grand are the promises he makes for his contributions to our future prospects and prosperities.

What in fact has happened to Latour is that he has gone back to his philosophical roots and now works on a plane of inquiry that is far removed from the social and political realities of everyday social life. There is something grossly Platonic and transcendental in his plan for bringing the sciences into "democracy." Democracy? Surely you're joking, Mr. Latour! The term appears immediately in the book's subtitle, but does not rate a definition in the glossary. This is a book that is written in the philosophical tradition that worries more about bats, armadillos, and Martians than about real human beings and then applies the "insights" of these worries to humans and their societies. The democracy that Latour writes about perhaps "exists" in some imaginary Platonic realm of ideas but nowhere on earth that I am aware of. The results inevitably reflect elegant literacy, are logically clever (or cleverly logical), and challenge the reader to distinguish brilliant insights from frivolous word play. Latour sees himself as a champion of novel insights on science, society, and nature that bear on the most pressing human problems, locally and globally. His admirers seem to be hypnotized by his neologisms, doodles, and wit, while his critics find him obscure and self-indulgent. His insights on the distinction between Science and science (see below) are enough, however, to make this an important book for students of the social relations of science and technology. His

style is reminiscent of a Rousseau or Hobbes; he writes with a naïve self-confidence about society, innocent (after the fact in this case) of or dismissive of the perspectives and findings of the social sciences.

Latour begins by claiming bluntly that political ecology has nothing to do with nature. "Political ecology" designates "the understanding of ecological crises that no longer uses nature to account for the tasks to be accomplished" (246). Perhaps the reader now expects the book as a whole to demonstrate the basis and implications of this claim, and surely to some extent that expectation is realized. But Latour immediately raises a cautionary flag – against this reasoned expectation of some sort of dialogue with the reader, he reveals that perhaps this is nothing more than Latour raising questions for himself and himself alone about nature, science, and politics, and what they have to do with each other. Even if and where this is an exercise in solipsism, it can be worth your while to follow Latour around while he muses and amuses. Inevitably, one must navigate around variations on clichés ("human beings are born free; everywhere they are in chains"), pithy confucianisms ("today's enemy is tomorrow's ally"), and the occasional Latin seasoning ("Non nova sed nove") in order to stay the course. The more dangerous navigation is through the counterintuitives that abound in Latour's writings. The danger is that the reader will dismiss counterintuitives that are grounded in the empirical research of the science studies movement and sociology along with counterintuitives that are idiosyncratic products of Latour's philosophical imagination. When he tries to draw you into a game of plurals – sciences, natures, politics -, you might be tempted to resist because you think of science and nature and not sciences and natures. But this is exactly where Latour is on the most solid grounds. His criticisms of Science and Nature reflect nearly three decades of research in the sociology and anthropology of science carried out by a variety of interdisciplinary scholars.

Latour is characteristically either sloppy or consciously inconsistent depending on how charitable the reader wants to be. Within the space of two pages he says first that he has no definitive answer to the opening query ("What is to be done with political ecology?"), and then that even though political ecology is already practically speaking doing what he claims it should be doing it requires his intervention. This is part of the Latourian game – keep the reader on his/her toes, caution him/her (correctly, let us acknowledge) that there are difficulties and complexities everywhere. When he then tells us that he has provided a six page "crib sheet" for "readers in a hurry" (perhaps you don't remember that he has already warned you that we need to proceed like the tortoise to beat the hare, or that he has promised you a meticulously organized argument), we are left to wonder why we shouldn't just read the crib sheet.

Latour's politics begins with Plato's allegory of the Cave. That allegory defines the relations between Science and society in the West. The myth, Latour writes, constructs an absolute difference between the world of truth and the social world. At the same time, the myth creates a philosopher-scientist who, unlike the rest of humanity, prisoners witness only to the Cave's shadows, can travel back and forth at will between the world of truth and the social world. This allegory has given us Science. Science Studies, by empirically investigating the nature and grounds of this Science, has given us the practical reality of the sciences. This is in my view indisputable. The old ideologies and myths of science, the classical philosophies of science, the old sociologies and histories of science, the journalistic, anecdotal, and heroic stories of science have not survived the empirical sociologists and

anthropologists of science. Latour, however, is going to draw an additional lesson from these results that requires eliminating sociology from our toolkit of methods of inquiry. This is where he and I (in company with David Bloor, Karin Knorr-Cetina, and other science studies scholars) part company. Latour, of course, will want to view our disagreement as nothing more sinister than a difference to be played out in the new agora as the field of "politics." He argues for something akin to philosopher Richard Rorty's idea that if we keep the conversation going all will be well. But it is the conversation of the West, and a polite one besides, that Rorty wants us to continue. This is the conversation that Latour too wants us to continue, a conversation that cannot sever the umbilical cord that ties our intellectual lives to the very Cave he wants us to escape.

Now just as we have to distinguish Science from the sciences, we have to distinguish the power politics of the Cave from politics, the "progressive composition of the common world." Philosophers like Rorty and Latour are liberal interpreters of the old myths of the West, weaving benign philosophies of academic discourse that do not sweat, urinate, or defecate, and that do not have recourse to conflict, let alone violence. This sort of liberal discourse promises to deliver us from the evils, issues, and troubles of our all-too-human world by marching lightly under the banner of conservative political commentator George Will: "Thou shalt not commit a sociology."

Part of the process of distinguishing politics from power politics involves distinguishing next between "militant ecology" and "the philosophy of ecology" (or *Naturpolitik*, which mimics the concept of *Realpolitik*). Latour's criticism of the ecology movements is that "under the pretext of protecting nature, [they] have also retained the conception of nature that makes their political struggle hopeless" (19). The argument from this point on becomes rather dense, especially for those who have not followed closely either Latour's writings or developments in science studies. The main point is that here, as in his earlier writings, Latour wants to blur the distinction between nature and society and between things and humans. On the question of nature, he wants to exorcise (a) the nature based on the idea of primary qualities (as opposed to secondary qualities); (b) the "warm and green" nature of *Naturpolitik*; and (c) the "red and bloody" nature of political economics. Regarding things and humans, Latour wants to legislate equal opportunity. He does not argue that things should or can speak for themselves or exhibit a humanoid agency (although he can be maddingly confusing about this point). Rather, he is opposed to scientists being the sole interpreters of the world of things, of experts taking upon themselves the job of "speaking for" the mute objects of the natural world. The point of all this is to reach our views on reality, the external world, and the unity of nature not by way of the travels and tales of the scientists moving between the worlds of truth and the social world but rather through "due process." This brings Latour into the world of constitutional politics.

Latour's cleverly understated defense of the constitutional metaphor fails to hide the philosophical assurance he projects that he has hit on a solution to nothing less than the crises of our time. He becomes the savior of our "public life." Until now, public life – under the influence of the Cave allegory – was ruled by a bicameral political model. The two houses of "nature" and "society" were constituted respectively of an assembly of things and an assembly of humans. Latour wants now to eliminate the distinction between nature and the representations we make of nature. This is the culmination of a process that emerged in the second edition of the pioneering ethnography of the Salk Institute, *Laboratory Life*, written by Latour and Steve

Woolgar. The subtitle of the first edition, published in 1979, was “the social construction of scientific facts.” For the second edition, published in 1986, the subtitle was changed to “the construction of scientific facts.” Now Latour claims that science studies “in combination with militant ecology,” shows us how to break away from the “deceptive self-evidence of the social sciences.” This means “abandoning” social constructivism. According to Latour, we need to change our notion of the social. In place of “the social world as prison” we put “the social world as association.” Recall that the allegory of the Cave gave us a world – a universe – in which special envoys called Scientists could move between nature and society to provide the rest of us with objective renderings or representations of the mute objects of nature. In Latour’s new constitution, there are no such special envoys and there is no barrier to go over and come back from. The sciences and (one could say) the politics are no longer concerned respectively with nature and with interests. Scientists and politicians now work as equals on the six functions of the collective. These functions are: perplexity, consultation, hierarchy, institution, maintenance of the separation of powers, and scenarization of the whole. Defining these terms here and summarizing their grounds is beyond the scope of this essay, but the “reader in a hurry” will find all of these terms defined in Latour’s glossary.

What do have, then? All of the institutions that manifest Latour’s proposed constitution, he notes, already exist in tentative form; and all of the old forms – subjects and objects, the external world, humans, and a cosmos – will be back, products of due process and not given, once and for all, at the beginning before due process. “No reality,” Latour proclaims, “without representation!” This is one of the two major allusions that perversely tie Latour’s liberal metaphysics to revolutionary theory and practice. He also echoes the famous title of Lenin’s essay, “What is to be done?” (which in turn recycled the title of Nicholas Chernyshevsky’s 1863 novel) and which has been a staple slogan in radical politics for nearly a century. The problem Latour addresses is: what is to be done with political ecology?; he concludes his book with the stronger Leninism: What is to be done? Political ecology! Latour is revolutionary the way Thomas Kuhn (*The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*) was revolutionary – not through his own efforts but rather through the tortured efforts of his acolytes.

These are liminal times. Perhaps all times are liminal in some way. But when we say “our time” is liminal here at the beginning of the second millennium we do so with a level of awareness of the flux of categories and classifications unavailable in earlier periods. And the categories and classifications at stake at this juncture of history and culture are the foundation of the world’s culture’s values, interests, and goals. Social movements and social changes in general have made such primordial classifications as male-female, person-fetus, and life-death problematic. I don’t mean to ignore earlier examples of this sort of problematic but rather to suggest that we are engaged in more fundamental problems in part on account of the scope of the historical and cross-cultural information we have access to. Nature-society and human-machine are among those challenged classifications. The very idea of science has become problematic as Western modes of thought become increasingly engaged with non-Western modes of thought. Dichotomous thinking across the spectrum of intellectual life has given way to thinking in terms of complexities, non-linearities, chaos, and fractals. One of the characteristics of liminal times is the proliferation of hybrids and monsters, that is, hybrid ideas and concepts and monstrous entities. We are everywhere in and out of the academy accosted by inter-, multi-, and transdisciplinarity. Cyborgs are succeeded by Robo Sapiens. Cloned sheep march alongside conventional cows and horses. Latour has exploited

this situation better than many (perhaps all) of his colleagues and competitors. At least, he has recognized the potential for exploitation. Competing exploiters are charged with exploring new ways of organizing our categories and classifications and serving as the source eventually of a new worldview, a new way of ordering the world that works for our changed circumstances. These efforts will in general strike us as awkward, counterintuitive, and obscure. Latour's mix of counterintuitives, even where some of us consider him wrongheaded and misguided, deserves our attention if for no other reason than that he draws out attention to the need to reconsider reigning categories and classifications. If sociology too has to be reconfigured, so be it. Latour has tried to do this without understanding first what it is that sociologists do. He has abandoned social constructivism (or constructionism) without persuading me and some of my science studies colleagues that he has discovered an alternative to the constituting activities of social relations. And that, after all is what social construction means: we have no recourse outside of our interactions – our social humanity - for constituting the world.